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MEMOIR

OF

THE HON. JAMES MURRAY ROBBINS.

BY

ROGER WOLCOTT.

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MEMOIR.

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James Murray Robbins was born and died in the town of Milton. In him were united many strains of the old Puritan blood of the early migrations to the Colony. It was perhaps this inheritance which constrained him and many of his ancestors to be useful and prominent in town and State affairs, and which tended also to make his mind conservative of the old methods and ideas when called upon to meet new questions which the later years brought for solution.

His first ancestor bearing the name of Robbins in America was Richard, who, with his wife Rebecca, established himself on the southerly side of Charles River, in Cambridge.

The third son of Richard was Nathaniel, — born, as was his father, in Scotland, — who married Mary Brazier, and lies in the Old Cambridge burying-ground. His oldest son, Nathaniel, was born Feb. 28, 1678, and married Hannah, daughter of William Chandler, of Andover, and Mary Dane.

Their third son, born Aug. 11, 1703, was Thomas Robbins, whose second son, by his first wife, Ruth Johnson, was Nathaniel, born April 17, 1726 (H. U. 1747). After his graduation he pursued at Cambridge the study of theology, and in 1751 was ordained minister of the church in Milton, in which office he died May 19, 1795. During this long pastorate of forty-four years, covering the period of the War of the Revolution, he performed his duties both as minister and

as citizen with zeal and self-devotion. His sympathy and support were given to the popular cause, and in 1788 he represented the town in the Convention which adopted the Federal Constitution. A good if not brilliant preacher, a healer of strife whether between churches or individuals, a man of sagacity and penetration, possessed of "a very accurate acquaintance with human nature," "he carried his amiable quality so far that even when those were mentioned who were blasted and flagitious, it was his custom to suggest an extenuation if possible." From contemporary evidence, too, we are assured that "in prayer he was remarkable for copiousness and facility of expression, and at funerals in particular he was admired for a variety of pathetick sentiments pertinent to every person immediately concerned, and to each incident that occurred." His wife was Elizabeth, youngest child of the Hon. Edward Hutchinson, and Lydia, daughter of the Hon. John Foster, who was a leading merchant and for many years Councillor.

Edward Hutchinson came of a distinguished family, was for many years Judge of Probate for Suffolk County, and was Treasurer of Harvard College from 1726 until his death in 1752. He was uncle of Thomas Hutchinson, who has received undeserved opprobrium as the last royal governor of the Province. His father, Elisha Hutchinson, Representative, Assistant, and Councillor, was the son of Colonel Edward Hutchinson, who met his death in an ambuscade in King Philip's War. Colonel Hutchinson was the son of William Hutchinson and his more famous wife, Ann Marbury, whose heretical theology caused her banishment by the austere Puritanism of the Bay Colony, and who finally fell a victim, as did her son, to the tomahawk of the savage.

The oldest son of the Rev. Nathaniel and Lydia Robbins was Edward Hutchinson Robbins, born Feb. 19, 1758 (H. U. 1775). After admission to the bar in 1779 he established himself in Milton, and entered upon a long career of useful and honorable service to his native town and to the State.

When only twenty-one years of age he was elected a delegate to the Convention which framed the Constitution of Massachusetts, being the youngest member of that distinguished body. For fourteen years he represented the town of Milton in the Legislature, and for nine years he occupied the Speaker's chair. For the performance of the duties of this position he was exceptionally qualified both by temperament and attainments. In 1795 he was appointed chairman of a commission to buy the necessary land and erect a new State House, the vote creating the commission also authorizing the sale of the Province House and the release to the town of Boston of the State's interest in the old State House. For ninety years the structure then erected has well sustained the test of changing taste. In 1796 he was elected by the House of Representatives to the United States Senate; but in this choice the other branch of the Legislature failed to concur, on the ground that the commercial interests of the State should be represented by a merchant rather than by a lawyer, and Mr. Goodhue, of Salem, was finally elected by the two Houses. For four years he filled the office of Lieutenant-Governor during the official term of Governor Strong. He was for seventeen years Judge of Probate for Norfolk County, and throughout his long and useful life his services were in constant requisition, both in public and private station; for his integrity and sound judgment rendered them of great value. He early became deeply interested in the purchase and settlement of the Commonwealth lands in Maine, and for more than forty years made annual visits to the region near Passamaquoddy. The profit from these investments did not accrue in his lifetime; but his name is perpetuated in the town of Robbinston on the St. Croix River, which attained considerable importance as a shipbuilding and trading port, until the decline of this industry checked the town's growth and converted its population from a seafaring to an agricultural community.

In November, 1785, he married Miss Elizabeth Murray, daughter of the Hon. James Murray and Barbara Bennett. Mr. Murray emigrated from Philiphaugh, Scotland, where his grandfather was hereditary Sheriff of Selkirk, to North Carolina, and established himself as a planter on the Cape Fear River. He here became a member of the Council of that Province; but in 1765, having lost his wife and several children, he removed to Boston with his two surviving daughters, who afterwards became Mrs. John Forbes and Mrs. E. H. Robbins.

Mr. Murray's sister was the wife of James Smith, whose sugar-house stood next below Brattle Street Church, and was occupied as barracks by Colonel Dalrymple's regiment, whence Captain Preston's company marched to the Boston Massacre. After the death of Mr. Smith his widow gave to her two nieces the estate on Brush Hill in Milton, where, soon after 1734, Mr. Smith had built the house in which the subject of this memoir was to pass the greater part of his life. Edward Hutchinson Robbins died in Boston, Dec. 29, 1829, and was deeply mourned by his friends and neighbors.

James Murray Robbins, his sixth child, was born June 30, 1796, in the old Gooch house on Milton Hill. When he was nine years old his father removed from Milton Hill to Brush Hill within the same town, making his residence in the Smith house, which had become the property of his wife; and here, eighty years later, the son died. He received his school education at the Milton Academy, which his father had been largely instrumental in founding, and of whose Board of Trustees the father and son filled the office of President for seventy-six years. At the age of fifteen he entered the counting-room of the prominent Boston merchants James and Thomas Handasyd Perkins, and there acquired a thorough training in business habits.

But the time was not propitious for commercial enterprise or success; the wide-spread stagnation of business, consequent

upon the blockade maintained by the British fleet, and the hardly less oppressive acts of our own Government, seemed to bar the way to entering upon the career of a merchant. In 1814 his cousin John Murray Forbes, who was Consul-General at Hamburg, invited him to accept official employment at the consulate; and it is not difficult to imagine how gladly the boy of eighteen must have exchanged the round of dull and apathetic duty in the counting-room for the excitement of the voyage and of foreign travel.

Nor was his journey to Hamburg devoid of incident. Passage was taken in a Swedish brig to sail from New York; and Mr. Robbins reached that city by the way of Albany, passing down the Hudson by steamer. While awaiting the sailing of the brig, he gave two days of volunteer service in throwing up intrenchments on Brooklyn Heights. The brig, after many delays, put to sea, but when off Block Island was captured by a British cruiser, and taken to Gardiner's Bay, where was the rendezvous of the squadron. On the ground that the vessel was owned in Connecticut, the Admiral adjudged her to be lawful prize, and, placing her under command of a prize-officer, ordered him to report at Plymouth, England. Mr. Robbins was the only American on board, and was therefore, unlike the others, made prisoner of war. On reaching the English port, however, his extreme youth, and, it is said, the kindly interest of some ladies who had been his fellow-passengers, interceded in his behalf, and he was released. It must be admitted that a considerable experience had been crowded into a brief time for the lad who had so recently left the provincial and beleaguered town of Boston.

On reaching London, the anxiety and perhaps suffering of the voyage were doubtless succeeded by admiration and wonder; for the great metropolis was celebrating with pageant and fête and every demonstration of popular rejoicing the return of European peace, and the relief which it brought from the intolerable burdens of almost universal war.

But the adventures which were to attend his journey to Hamburg were not yet ended. The vessel in which he soon again embarked in London for his destination, went ashore in a dense fog at the mouth of the Elbe. The wind was strong, and the danger of the vessel going to pieces was great; but after several hours of exposure the passengers and crew succeeded in effecting a landing, saving, however, from the wreck only the clothing they wore. They were upon an island, and found shelter in the light-house, until, some days after, a boat transported them to the mainland. After such adventures, and in a destitute condition, did Mr. Robbins at length reach Hamburg, where the warm greeting of his kinsman, Mr. Forbes, must have been not unwelcome to him. He at once set himself resolutely to learn the German language, entering for this purpose the family of a country clergyman, and eventually acquired a rare accuracy and facility both of expression and pronunciation.

In 1815 Mr. Forbes was summoned from his post of duty by Mr. John Quincy Adams for conference in regard to the negotiation of commercial treaties with foreign powers, and Mr. Robbins was left in charge of the consulate with the title of Vice-Consul. The peace was of short duration. The news of Napoleon's escape from Elba electrified Europe, and the weeks of fevered excitement which followed culminated at Waterloo. Soon the streets of Hamburg echoed the tread of Blücher's veterans; and at a civic banquet given to the victor, to which the representatives of all foreign governments were invited, the boy of nineteen represented the United States. After Mr. Forbes's return to Hamburg, Mr. Robbins by his orders acted for some time as Consul at Elsinore, — a residence which could not have been barren of vivid and lasting impressions.

Mr. Forbes was subsequently transferred to Rio Janeiro; and Mr. Robbins, then about twenty-one, returned to Boston. In three years he had indeed seen much, had breathed the

educating atmosphere of stirring events, and had learned the important lesson of self-reliance.

For two years he made voyages as supercargo to the West Indies and the Baltic in the interest of his old employers, and then entered into a partnership with his elder brother Edward Hutchinson Robbins for the manufacture and sale of woollen goods. In the commercial panic of 1829 the firm went down in the prevalent ruin, and Mr. Robbins seems then to have resolved never to expose himself to a recurrence of like ill-fortune. He did not again engage in business on his own account; but his peculiar fitness, acquired through the varied experience of these past years, led to his appointment by some of the leading woollen manufacturers of New England as agent for the purchase of wool in Germany. This transferred him again to the scene of his former official duties; and there he now spent a year and a half, for which he was liberally compensated.

Before his departure he had, with the help of a guide, made a careful and extended survey of a large part of the almost untrodden wilderness of Maine, led thereto by his father's large interests in the pine forests of Passamaquoddy; and, impressed by the future importance of this product, he had himself secured, by purchase from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, a tract of 20,000 acres near the Schoodic Lakes. On his return from Germany in 1834 — although the days had not yet come of the great speculation in Maine lands, which was to prove so disastrous to many — he was able to sell this land at a very large advance upon the purchase money.

In the same year he married Frances Mary Harris, daughter of Abel Harris, of Portsmouth, and Rooksby Coffin, daughter of William Coffin, of Boston, a cousin of Admiral Sir Isaac Coffin. They had no children; but the marriage proved a most happy one, and Mrs. Robbins's death in 1870 was a deep and enduring grief to him.

The sale of his Maine estates was a most fortunate transaction; for it furnished the means of realizing his long-cherished

wish of becoming the sole owner of the old homestead on Brush Hill, where much of his boyhood had been passed, and which was endeared to him not more by its rare beauty of location than by the memory of the large family circle which had gathered about its hearthstone, and of the long list of guests — many of them the distinguished men of the time — whom his father's almost lavish hospitality had there brought together. This was his home during the remainder of his life. His love for it was a passion. It forbade change, which in his eyes could never seem improvement. The old buildings, the fences and walls, were to remain as they were in his boyhood. The old trees, many of them imported elms, generously planted by former generations, — nay, their very saplings, — should be untouched by the axe so long as he should live; and the fine fringe of trees which everywhere skirts the lichen-covered stone walls of the estate attests his vigilant guardianship. The extensive view from the house, including the distant blue of the harbor, the twin church spires, the wooded range of the Blue Hills, and the broad and verdant meadows, was always a source of keen enjoyment to him.

Once, however, his treasured possessions were threatened by a great danger, which roused him to the fullest activity in their defence. The new and vigorous town of Hyde Park, spreading with the rapid growth of a manufacturing community, sought the authority of the Legislature to add to its territory by annexing a portion of Milton, including Mr. Robbins's estate. His energetic opposition to this project and his untiring efforts to defeat it were successful. In the town of Milton he had been born, and in the town of Milton he would die.

This was not the only service he rendered to the town of his birth, for which his affection was always so strong. In 1837 and again in 1861 he represented Milton in the General Court, and in 1842 was one of the senators from Norfolk County. He was frequently called to serve upon committees

whenever the interests of the town were involved or important action was to be taken, and his judgment was always considered to carry much weight and influence. Originally a Whig, he joined the Republican party at its formation, and thereafter consistently acted with it, although not without criticism of some of its most important tendencies and measures. His wife had long shared the opinions and counsels of the anti-slavery leaders; and in him was awakened a sense of indignant resentment by the assault upon Charles Sumner in the Senate-chamber. In the demonstration made by the citizens of Boston upon Mr. Sumner's return, Mr. Robbins bore a prominent part.

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While a young man he developed a strong taste for historical and antiquarian research, and throughout life this taste directed much of his reading and thought. He made a careful and leisurely exploration of Dorsetshire, England, whence came so many of the first settlers of Massachusetts Bay, and made his mind a storehouse of accurate information touching the families and events which had illustrated the early history of the New England town of Dorchester. When this history was written in 1859, he was the author of the first six chapters. In 1862 he accepted the invitation of the town of Milton to deliver the address at the celebration of its two hundredth year. In this address he traces in much detail the lives of the prominent early and later inhabitants of the town, giving abundant proof of his wide information regarding family history, and of his patience in research and exactness in statement. By vote of the town in 1883 he was made chairman of a committee appointed to prepare a history of Milton, and to him were referred the early pages of this work for correction and elucidation. In spite of his great age at this time, his co-laborers in the work bear willing testimony to the extreme value of the aid thus rendered. In 1860 he was elected a Resident Member of the Massachusetts Historical

Society, and in this association he found always much interest and enjoyment.

But as the years went on, the naturally conservative tendency of Mr. Robbins's mind led him to withdraw himself in great measure from active participation in the affairs of men. He praised the time that is past, and looked forward with apprehension to the time that is to come. To borrow Mr. Lowell's thought, evolution in his view too often took on its lacking initial, and wore the threatening aspect of revolution. He failed to perceive the logical necessity of social and political change; and as he looked forth upon the passing events of the time, he deemed himself gazing upon the turbulence of the rapids, just above the fateful plunge of the cataract. As he could not stay the current, he sheltered himself more and more within the seclusion of his beautiful estate, and with no trace of bitterness or cynicism devoted himself to the life of a country gentleman, finding pleasure in his acres and venerable trees, reading and studying as his inclination directed, and living in friendly and helpful intercourse with his neighbors.

His bearing and manner were dignified and genial. In his old age his dress and appearance seemed to reflect the unchanging stability and respectable antiquity of his opinions. His figure was sturdy and erect, his features massive, and his smile ready and pleasing. Through judicious management his property was much increased, and he left a large estate.

Until within two years of his death, at the ripe age of eighty-nine years and four months, he retained in a remarkable degree his vigor both of body and mind. He died on Monday, Nov. 2, 1885, in the home he had loved so well, and was buried, as were his father and grandfather, in the cemetery of the town which the three generations had served and honored. With him disappeared the family name, which for one hundred and thirty-five years had been held in respect and affection by his fellow-townsmen.